

Misquamicut, Rhode Island

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SLAM! THE sound of the screen door calls to you as you walk softly with bare feet across the damp grass to the path leading to the beach. The heat of the day lingers in the sand, although the dark air is now cool and damp. Up, over the dunes and down through the sea grass the path takes you as you inhale the sharp, salty air voraciously; it fills your lungs and soul with a freshness, an aliveness unmatched in worlds of smells. The beach, deserted, stretches in a long, white curve punctuated at each end by the twinkling, kaleidoscopic lights of twin amusement parks miles away. The water is at low tide, and the beach drops then flattens out to a broad plateau of hard sand before it melts to the water line. Behind you sleep a hundred dark cottages, tired and faded from the long, hot, sun-baked day.

You look to the sea—it is complacent now, ruffled only at the fringes where the waves crowd in restlessly, unceasingly, plunging down on the sand then stealthily slipping away with a quiet hiss. Again and again they come, with the same sound, the same sucking and slithering as they slide back into the sea. To the right and to the left you can hear the echo of a thousand other waves, each falling, receding. You move to the water's edge—the sand is cold and wet now; your footprints trail behind you in a series of pushed-up humps. You walk along the sand, feeling the fingertips of the waves sneak up under your feet and then disappear as they slink in and out, in and out. Sometimes a shell, sculptured more skillfully than Michaelangelo's work, is carelessly carried in and forgotten by an unappreciative wave. It settles on the sand, looking luminous and ethereal in the moonlight. You start to pick it up, then decide it belongs there and walk on.

You turn and face the sea once more and discover that the moon has cleared a wide silver path across the waves. The path leads straight to you standing there at the water's edge, and the face of the moon winks and beckons you to come. The waves pull the sand from under your feet, urging you to move, telling you there is something more solid out there; you hesitate, for you are alone in the world and there is no one to advise you—only the winking moon. You remember the shell and turn to confer with it, but discover that it has already gone ahead of you. Then you look to the moon to ask once more before you start, but find a cloud has hidden it away, and your path is gone, and you are standing in the water, and the air has grown chill. You slowly turn and start back across the rumpled sand to your sleeping cottage.